

# 40 EPA discusses cleanup with business owners

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Vermiculite cleanup for businesses will be similar to the residential cleanup process, Environmental Protection Agency project manager Jim Christiansen said Monday evening at an open house.

The open house was held to give business owners an idea of what cleanup of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite would entail. Letters were recently sent to some owners stating that their busi-

nesses were slated for cleanup.

"We wanted everyone to know what is in store for them," Christiansen said.

As with residential cleanup, the EPA will initially perform a contaminant screening study, visually examining the property and taking samples where necessary.

In the pre-design stage, portions of the property deemed contaminated will be rechecked and the extent of the contamination will be ascertained.

A meeting will then be held between

the business owner and a community involvement coordinator, at which time the logistics of the possible interim operation of the business will be discussed.

The final step before the actual cleanup is a pre-construction meeting with owners where details of the ensuing work will be laid out and pictures will be taken to document the placement of items and the condition of the structure prior to cleanup.

"For most of you, the next step will be pre-design," Christiansen told the

business owners attending the open house.

As with residential cleanup, proprietors are not obligated to have their property cleaned. The direness of cleaning a business could be less than a residence because people are not living in the building.

"As with residential properties, cleanup is strictly voluntary, and we understand that there may be better

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# Cleanup

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times for cleanup in the future," Christiansen said. "Again, we will work with owners on timing. However, EPA urges property owners to consent to cleanup at the first opportunity.

"For those who ultimately don't allow cleanup, EPA may consider steps in the future to compel cleanup or to ensure that potential buyers or users of the property are warned of the potential health risks associated with the property."

Depending on the size of the building and the complexity of the cleanup, the actual work will generally take anywhere from one to two weeks, Christiansen said, during which time the business will have to be closed.

"Most of the work will be insulation removal," he said.

In the case of Millwork West, the business was shut down for months. Christiansen said that particular cleanup job was not typical.

Logistically, relocating a business for a short period of time is not a viable option. For businesses dependent on communication with customers, phone or fax lines might be installed elsewhere to keep the business running.

"Each business is unique," Christiansen said. "And we will do whatever we can to accommodate the owner and offset any losses in revenue."

Although business owners may be compensated for incidental costs, the definition of which remains a gray area, they will not be reimbursed for lost revenue.

To minimize the adverse effects of shutting down a business for one or two weeks, the EPA will work with the owner to formulate a convenient and timely schedule. Seasonal businesses, for example, could be cleaned during the slow time of the year.

One suggestion offered by an attendee was that the EPA pay for advertisements in the media informing the community of a business's impending closure.

"Some people might like to know ahead of time if a business is going to shut down temporarily," the woman said.

Christiansen said he would be open to the possibility, emphasizing that each business would have different needs and circumstances.

The budget for cleanup in Libby is roughly \$16 million for this year, Christiansen said, equating to 130-140 properties cleaned. Employees of the fed-

eral agency are in the process of contacting business owners and holding pre-design meetings.

A number of businesses have already been cleaned, which Christiansen said provided critical experience for the agency. Demolition of a building would only be considered if the cost of cleanup exceeded the expense of razing the structure.

"Very few properties will have to be demolished," he said.

Similar to residences, business owners will have no liability in the cleanups. A document absolving the owner of liability would be transferable to future business owners.

Another document stating that the property was cleaned by the EPA has thus far eased real estate transactions involving cleaned properties.

"It's been very effective with property transfers," Christiansen said.

In certain instances, vermiculite may be left behind in contained areas or portions of a building that are inaccessible and where the substance's presence does not pose a safety risk.

"We're not going to remove every flake of vermiculite from Libby," Christiansen said. "If

it's not easily accessible and it's contained, we might leave it."

The EPA is in the process of assembling an operations and maintenance work group to deal with complications in Libby once the agency leaves town. Business owners doing renovation years later on properties where contained vermiculite remains, may be compensated if a specific fund is started.

"It's certainly an option I'm considering," Christiansen said.

If additional funds were allocated to Libby cleanup, the process would remain the same, albeit at an accelerated rate.

"The approach or cleanup process would not change substantively if we had more money," he said. "We have a sound process and we're going to do the best we can to work with you."

Christiansen emphasized the need for open communication lines between the public and the federal agency. The open house was held to dispel rumors and place everyone on the same page.

"We're taking the same approach to all the buildings that are left," he said. "We'll work closely with each of you on the details of the cleanup."